

# Point/Counterpoint – Published by Ellsworth American

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Commentary  
Shotgun Weddings Sometimes Succeed

By Suzanne Lukas

Without a doubt, school consolidation in Maine was like a shotgun wedding. Lawmakers in Augusta loaded up the buckshot and pointed the barrel at every small town in the state. The message was clear: tie the knot or your state funding for education is in peril. Now, with a mere 30 months of sharing expenses and joint property, the policy-makers have said you can dissolve the union. Still, we all know that just because you can get a divorce doesn't mean that is the right thing to do — especially when it impacts the children.

Regional School Unit 24 brought together 12 communities to form one district serving 2,600 students in 10 schools. Sorting through the governance issues was hard enough. These first two and a half years required the development of more than 100 mandatory policies. Internally, more than 500 staff members needed to meld into one organization with common calendars and collective bargaining agreements. And that doesn't begin to shed light on the work of creating aligned curriculum and fostering educational change.

The promise of the consolidation movement was reduced costs. RSU 24 has delivered on that promise. In the year immediately preceding the formation of the RSU, the 12 communities spent \$2,500,000 more for education than they are spending in this fiscal year. That is an annual savings. Collective efficiencies such as lower costs for supplies and materials, more effective use of staffing and centralized administration have resulted in measurable reductions in food service, system administration and transportation.

Perhaps the best example of the merits of consolidation is special education. Programs previously provided at higher costs by outside agencies have been created within the district. Life skills programs have been expanded. The availability of psychological services and social workers has increased. Even with these improvements, RSU 24 is realizing annual savings of \$600,000 over pre-consolidation costs.

In some towns there has been fear that small schools will be closed. That will not happen anytime in the near future. Last year the district submitted seven applications for state funded school construction projects. Not one received funding. Had we succeeded, there may have been reason to look at building a facility to alleviate problems for more than one school. A careful look at our enrollments has shown clearly that we will continue to occupy all of our buildings for years to come.

At a time when state funding to coastal communities has eroded, the formation of the RSU has helped. Take Lamoine, for instance. In 2008-2009, prior to reorganization, the town received \$179,000 in state subsidy. By 2010-2011 state aid had disappeared. Going it alone would have meant

A Better Way than the RSU Way

By Gordon Donaldson, Ed.D.

The Regional School Unit (RSU) law in 2007 was supposed to improve the quality of learning for our kids and save money by making big school districts. RSU 24 was formed when fewer than 6 percent of registered voters in 12 towns from Steuben to Ellsworth approved closing down Unions 92 and 96 and the Ellsworth School Department. So, two and a half years later, has RSU 24 been good for our kids and our taxpayers?

The evidence I see says "No." Citizens in five communities seeking to withdraw from RSU24 agree. We're not better off than we were before and, as RSU 24 goes the way of most centralized bureaucracies, our educational future is at risk. So far, the RSU office and board have written lots of policies, required many new procedures and trimmed budgets and school staffs. Missing has been a strong, clear educational mission that improves learning. Programs and staffing have been "equalized" by cutting them back to "equally low" levels, especially in our smaller schools. Central office staff has grown. Some towns have saved, but others are paying more than before. And the RSU has yet to face a huge bill required by the law: equalizing pay scales for staff across the 12 towns.

The RSU's struggles are not the fault of the many talented educators working with our children every day. The flaws are built into the structure and size of it. We all would be better served by smaller, more responsive and more educationally focused school districts. Towns and the RSU Board should seriously consider re-forming the RSU into smaller collaborating school districts that share the following features.

### **Return Responsibility for Schools to Towns.**

The RSU spans too great an area with too many differing communities and schools. It can't be effectively led. (RSU24 has had three superintendents in two-plus years; few original board members still serve.) Our towns know their families. They know their taxpayers. They are in the best position to make decisions about what's right for both. When we joined the RSU, our town School Committees ceased to exist. Bring them back! They are our best "eyes on education" because they care most about their own kids and schools.

### **Return the Power of the Budget to Towns.**

Town taxpayers no longer help to develop or vote directly on their school's budget. We are now told what the budget is (\$33 million) and to vote on it at an RSU-wide meeting; only 100-150 citizens from all 12 towns turn out. Our boards of selectmen, our school committees and our citizens deserve to decide where our tax dollars go and to oversee how well they are spent. They, too, could have made the savings the RSU did when state funds dried up.

**Expect and Support our School Faculties to Be the Best.** Teaching requires teachers to constantly adjust how they teach — and often to teach different children differently in the same classroom. If teachers

cutting programs or raising taxes to fill the gap. Through efficiencies inherent in a larger district, neither happened. Despite the loss of all state funding for education, the town's local share increased only \$27,865.

Economics is not the only benefit of our larger district. School programs are enhanced by the addition of laptops at the secondary level and increased technology in elementary settings. Pre-kindergarten programs are in place at several sites. New assessments and academic support programs are strengthening reading instruction. Research-based programs in mathematics are in place. Improvements are under way in science and social studies. Alternative education and two vocational school programs are expanding what we offer secondary students.

RSU 24 offers high quality staff training that would be difficult to replicate in a small district. With more than a dozen teachers at a grade level there is opportunity for common learning and sharing. Take our present writing initiative, for instance. Nationally respected presenters have provided multi-session training for all instructional staff. Teachers at each grade level come together to examine student work and articulate a skill sequence that builds from kindergarten through high school. As a district, we are already seeing improvement in student writing.

And what about the children? They are doing just fine. On state testing over the first three years, RSU 24 has shown gains in reading, writing and mathematics at the elementary level. Nationally normed tests indicate that students are gaining in skill and a large majority meet grade level standards. Our high school students are benefiting from school improvement initiatives and new instructional programs in English and mathematics.

RSU 24 has a great team of teachers, administrators and support staff who are committed to high quality educational programs. They are building a strong, effective school system. But this takes time.

Yes, a town can divorce itself from a consolidated district and, after a lengthy withdrawal process, go its own way. Voters, however, need to examine this carefully. Remember, shotgun weddings sometimes do result in lasting, worthwhile relationships.

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are to challenge and support every child, they need the flexibility and resources to make the right decisions. The RSU's emphasis on uniform rules and policies restricts teachers' professional choices and their ability to be responsive to kids' learning needs. Central office staff work hard to support school staffs, but the sheer size of the RSU has made it impossible to succeed as, for example, Union 92 once did. A smaller, less bureaucratic district — like a small, entrepreneurial business — can keep the focus where it belongs: on how to help every teacher and principal do their best by every child.

**Share Costs and Services.** The long-term cost-savings from RSU24 can be gained by smaller districts agreeing to work together. Union 92 and Ellsworth did this prior to RSU24. Cost-sharing happened throughout Hancock County in the 1980s. Smaller districts can join together for bulk purchasing and to share business management, special education management, transportation management and educational resources and services. The key is: don't let the tail wag the dog! These management systems must serve the goals and interests of each town's educational program, not the other way around. Towns should pay only the school district costs they agree to share.

Towns and the RSU 24 Board should look hard at the "other type of district," the Alternative Organizational Structure, or AOS. It offers all the benefits over an RSU that I have described. All but two Hancock County towns use this structure. Currently, three towns — Hancock, Lamoine and Otis — are exploring forming an AOS. Two smaller AOS districts that agree to share costs and services will be more manageable and more effective than RSU24 can ever be. Most importantly, the AOS structure will return responsibility for education to parents, to citizens, and to the teachers, principals and other school staff who are working daily to make a difference for our kids.

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